

*This article originally appeared in the Washington Post on July 19, 2011. It was written by Dana Milbank. You can read the original [here](#).*

After he switched to the Republican Party in 1962, Ronald Reagan famously quipped: “I didn’t leave the Democratic Party. The party left me.”

Now, the Republican Party is doing the same thing to him — and Democrats are happy to take Reagan back.

At Tuesday morning’s meeting of the House Democrats, caucus chairman John Larson rallied his colleagues for the day’s debt-limit debate by playing an [audio recording of the 40th president](#).

“Congress consistently brings the government to the edge of default before facing its responsibility,” Reagan says in the clip. “This brinkmanship threatens the holders of government bonds and those who rely on Social Security and veterans benefits. Interest rates would skyrocket, instability would occur in financial markets, and the federal deficit would soar. The United States has a special responsibility to itself and the world to meet its obligations.”

“Kind of sums things up,” Larson said, playing the same clip again at a news conference.

Nobody knows what Reagan, who [died in 2004](#), would make of the current fight over the debt limit. But 100 years after Reagan’s birth, it’s clear that the Tea Party Republicans have little regard for the policies of the president they claim to venerate.

Tea Party Republicans call a vote to raise the debt ceiling a threat to their very existence; [Reagan presided over 18 increases in the debt ceiling](#) during his presidency.

Tea Party Republicans say they would sooner default on the national debt than raise taxes; [Reagan agreed to raise taxes 11 times](#)

.

Tea Party Republicans, in “cut, cap and balance” legislation on the House floor Tuesday, voted to cut government spending permanently to 18 percent of gross domestic product; under Reagan, spending was as high as 23.5 percent and never below 21.3 percent of GDP.

That same legislation would take federal spending down to a level last seen in 1966, before Medicare was fully up and running; Reagan in 1988 signed a major expansion of Medicare.

Under the Tea Party Republicans’ spending cap, Reagan’s military buildup, often credited with winning the Cold War, would have been impossible.

No wonder Democrats on Tuesday were claiming the Republican icon as one of their own. After the caucus meeting with the Reagan clip, Rep. Mike Quigley (D-Ill.) began the day’s debate by reading from a [1983 Reagan letter](#) to Congress warning that “the full consequences of a default — or even the serious prospect of default — by the United States are impossible to predict and awesome to contemplate.”

“In the year of his 100th birthday, the Great Communicator might be amazed at how far his own image has shifted from the original,” Quigley charged. “He’d see his most dedicated followers using his name as justification for saying no to honoring our debts. He’d see his legacy used to play chicken with the world’s greatest economic engine.”

Republicans have continued their ritual praise of Reagan during the debt-limit fight. Rep. [Trent Franks \(Ariz.\) claimed](#)

that the budget caps would allow America to be “that great city on a hill that Ronald Reagan spoke of.”

[Marsha Blackburn](#)

(Tenn.) invoked Reagan’s belief that “the closest thing to eternal life on Earth is a federal government program.”

[Kevin Brady](#)

(Tex.) cited Reagan’s line that “the nine most terrifying words in the English language are ‘I’m

from the government and I'm here to help.' " Both Steve King (Iowa) and Bobby Schilling (Ill.) informed the body that they had granddaughters named Reagan.

But while Reagan nostalgia endures, a number of Republicans have begun to admit the obvious: The Gipper would no longer be welcome on the GOP team. Most recently, Rep. [Duncan Hunter Jr. \(Calif.\) called Reagan](#) a "moderate former liberal . . . who would never be elected today in my opinion." This spring, [Mike Huckabee judged](#) that "Ronald Reagan would have a very difficult, if not impossible time being nominated in this atmosphere," pointing out that Reagan "raises taxes as governor, he made deals with Democrats, he compromised on things in order to move the ball down the field."

During the debt-limit debate, a procession of Democrats — Vermont's Peter Welch, Maryland's Chris Van Hollen, New York's Paul Tonko, Texas's Sheila Jackson Lee and Gene Green — claimed Reagan's support for their position. Reagan is "revered by many Democrats," said Welch, who praised Reagan for fighting "the absurd notion that America had an option when it came to paying our bills."

Half a century after he left the party, the Gipper is winning one for the Democrats.